Idolatry - 1968
May 5, 1968
Exodus 20:1-3
Matthew 23

I've always had trouble with the word "idolatry", and I expect you have too. It is one of those things we are supposed to be against - but the content of that, against which we ought to take a stand, has never seemed very real to me. I've never seen a golden calf, nor have I ever literally bowed down before the "Almighty Dollar" - whatever that means. I haven't consciously worshipped success, or security although I'm quite interested in both. In short, the classical definition of idolatry - setting up a graven image and falling down before it - seems to me, much too simple and not very meaningful.

And yet, at the very heart of the Judeo-Christian tradition is the conviction that the greatest threat to true religion is nothing other than idolatry. Some have gone so far as to say that the root sin, the fundamental cause of man's broken relationship with God, is some form of idolatry. Certainly the Old Testament minces no words: the ten commandments begin with this injunction: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. - You shall have no other gods before me." That's clear enough. And when Moses came down fromMt. Sinai with the stone tablets to discover the people of Israel worshipping ahome-made golden calf, it was fairly obvious that they had broken this first and fundamental commandment. Later on, when the Israelites worshipped the Baal gods of the Canaanites, it was equally obvious that they were "having other gods before the Lord God."

But by the time of Jesus Christ this particular form of idolatry was no longer occuring. The Jews had become a solidly monotheistic nation. There was only one God, and his name was Yahweh. He was not just one out of many gods: he was the only God: there was none other. The threat of idolatry seemed to be passed.

But, in reality, it's not quite that simple. A more careful reading of the First Commandment reveals that there is more to this matter of idolatry than the acknowledgment of the existence of a competing deity. The command itself begins, not with the restriction against other Gods, but with the statement: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." And once that is established, once God has been defined as the deliverer, the source of liberty and freedom, the narrative moves to the command - you shall have no other gods before me.

That is to say - there is a connection here between being delivered from bondage and acknowledging the Lord asGod. Likewise there is a negative connection between being in bondage - and having other gods, i.e. idolatry. And at this point the whole Old Testament notion of idolatry takes on new and relevant meaning for your life and mine.

Idolatry is not just the simplified act of dancing around a totem pole, it is any kind of ultimate commitment to that which is less than ultimate. Idolatry is not just building a golden calf - it is any kind of loyalty or obedience to any person, principle , nation, law - any thing, any goal, which restricts our freedom to obey God and God alone. Idolatry is to give away our freedom to anything - to be idolatrous is, therefore, to be in prison. To the ancient Israelite - bondage, slavery meant one thing - Egypt. And they were freed from that bondage only when they began to radically obey God. Then they walked out of Egypt, through the Red Sea, across the desert and into a land of their own. Then they were free to become the nation God had created them to be.

This motif, grounded in history, becomes a symbolic struggle through out the Old Testament. Whenever the Jews were less than obedient to their God, they slipped back into a kind of bondage. Whenever anything replaced that obedience - patriotism, legalism, racial purity, materialism - they were guilty of idolatry. As a matter of fact, the greatest induce ment to idolatry was the formal religion itself.

This is subtle, and it requires some careful thought to understand it: but the story the Old Testament tells is one of a religion, the original intent of which was to provide a way of responding obediently to the good and gracious acts of God, actually replacing God in the hearts and minds of the people, and in the central arena of the nation's life. Over the years, the greatest emphasis was placed not on the Lord God, but on religion; on the formal structure - the laws, rules, rituals and ceremonies. This is idolatry of the most subtle and dangerous type,

And it is into this kind of idolatrous situation that Jesus Christ came. It was within the context of this kind of subtle idolatry that the Gospel of Jesus Christ took form and shape. Everywhere he looked Jesus saw idolatry - and to his contemporaries he preached a Gospel of radical freedom. To him, the pious Jew, trying with all his might to obey the 613 separate legal injunctions of the Mosaic code, looked like a slave - and he called him to a new freedom in obedience to God. To him, the wealthy property owner, tearing down old barns to build new ones, looked like a bonded servant strapped to the endless restrictions of materialism and he called him to be free of these restrictions. To anyone who would listen he advised getting rid of everything that restricts, wealth or poverty, family - even religion - and it's no wonder that he ran head-on into the rigid establishment, particularly the religious establishment.

This conflict between Jesus and the formal religion symbolized by the Pharisees: this conflict between freedom to obey God, and restriction in idolatry, is articulated in length in the 23rd chapter of Matthew, part of which was read this morning. The Pharisees, according to Jesus, didn't practice what they preached. They laid heavy burdens on mens' shoulders - burdens hard to bear. They were so enamoured with the formalized niceties of their religion and their own roll in the perpetuation of the ecclesiastical structures that they had forgotten about the original intent of their faith. They didn't care if men obeyed God, so long as they maintained the facade of religion. They were, that is to say, making, a God of religion itself.

In that 23rd chapter we read the seven woes: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!" The three words went together, and seven times Jesus took them to task for the superficiality of their lives, the sheer phoniness of their religion. The best known of these terse and uncom fortable accusations sounds like this: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but within you are full of uncleanness and iniquity." That's pretty strong medicine. It makes me uncomfortable just reading it. It is an indictment of allkinds of idolatry - without specific idols: idolatry which induces men to sell their souls for a mess of pottage: idolatry which prompts men to become slaves instead of free men. And if we are going to think about idolatry in 1968 - it is this motif that must guide our thinking.

It is no secret that there are a lot of little tin gods floating around in our way of life: idols to whom the American people seem only too willing to sell their souls. But rather than launch a pulpit tirade - such as I've heard a hundred times myself, I would rather direct your attention to one of the most descriptive documents I have ever seen, one of the best interpretations of the first commandment I have ever experienced - I refer to the motion pictures "The Graduate".

The unfortunate thing about movies like "The Graduate" is that people who are neurotically ashamed of their own sexuality go with the intent of eating forbidden fruit. Then they emerge, telling the world that it's a dirty movie - and of course, they are right if that's why you go in the first place. The same mentality, of course, would call the Song of Solomon hard core pornography if it ever came out in paperback with a lusty picture on the front.

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"The Graduate" came across to me as a sermon based on the first commandment an the 23rd chapter of Matthew: a judgmental, prophetic statement about the rampant idolatry in the American way of life. In this sense, it was the most "moral" motion picture I've seen in a long time.

If you have seen it, forgive me while I talk about it. If you plan to see it, you'll have to forgive me for revealing the plot. "The Graduate" is a simple story of a young man moving into the adult world and trying to find something real, something of worth and integrity. He, as all the persons in the movie, is a caricature, an amplification - an exaggeration, done for the purpose of making a point.

His story begins at a party thrown by his parents to celebrate his very successful collegiate career. But the people at the party are not real at all: they are one and all wearing masks, playing rolls - in prison - particularly his parents. Their idolatry is in status, the image of busy success earned by their son. In revulsion against the sheer phoniness of it all, Benjamin keeps trying to withdraw to his room to think, and is finally dragged kicking and screaming into an affair with the infamous Mrs. Robinson.

His summer is one of involvement in American idolatry - fun, sex, booze, all of it depersonalized, none of it real. He can't even establish a conversation with Mrs. Robinson. There's nothing to talk about: she's not a person. Meanwhile the pressure increases for him to "do" something: to get started pursuing the other god of this vacuous way of life - success. It seems that Benjamin is lost - a captive to the phony, shallow world of idolatry all about him.

But then a real human being enters the story in the person of Mrs. Robinson's daughter, Elaine. She is real: she cries when she's hurt. She is worth something. And suddenly Benjamin becomes a man, no longer a slave. Suddenly he is in charge and the pursuit is on.

To the utter horror of Mrs. Robinson he reveals his intent to marry Elaine and his manner of pursuit is both funny and tragic. In order to stop him a hasty wedding is arranged between Elaine and another suitor. And at this point the church enters in a very telling and harsh manner.

The wedding is in progress - in a Presbyterian Church, of course: all the phonies are inside with smirks on their faces - and in he bursts just as the benediction is pronounced. In a frantic scene he rescues Elaine, beating back the enraged mob with an ornamental brass cross. They escape - and he uses the cross to barricade the door. Everyone is locked inside the church, while Benjamin and Elaine escape into freedom.

That, too, is strong medicine. That hurts, especially when all the hypocrites get locked in the church with their own expensive, brass cross. That hit me with the same kind of impact that I imagine Jesus' statement about white-washed tombs had on the Pharisees. And it made me a little bit angry. And for that reason it was a far better sermon than you'll ever hear from a pulpit.

We don't build golden calves any more, but we are very much involved in a cult of success. That has become the ultimate. Success is the god to which we are willing to sell our souls and bodies. We have no goddess of sex whom we worship, and yet just the advertisements in our slick magazines reveal that depersonalized sex is certainly one of the chief ends of man in 1968. Like the caricatures in "The Graduate", we are very much motivated by "what other people will think." We are caught up in a way of life that demands that we sell ourselves for a "mess of pottage".

To what are we ultimately committed? That is the question raised throughout the Bible - the same question raised by "The Graduate". Is it success? Money? Security? Sensual satisfaction? Is it perhaps the formal structures of our religion? Can we answer these questions honestly? Can we say that we are not, every one of us, involved in idolatry?

The adhesive element of the Judeo-Christian tradition is that God has created every human being to be a free agent, and that that precious and fragile liberty is discovered only in a relationship of obedience to him. That is why he has created us, not to become slaves of some demonic force - whether it be sex or success, but to be free - to be fully and completely men.

It is to that kind of freedom that Jesus Christ called his people. And for most of them it was too radical, too dangerous. And it is to that kind of freedom that he calls you and me in 1968. He would have us committed ultimately only to that which is ultimate. Anything less, regardless of the particular form it takes, is idolatry.

"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." -

Let us have no other Gods before him. Amen.

O thou who alone art absolute, grant us the integrity to worship thee only. Keep us from all shallowness:give us the courage to live in the blessed freedom thou hast given. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMen.